

# Role of false descriptions in trial by fire, twelve angry men and the thin blue l...

[Life](#)



## **Justice and Injustice**

The logical fallacies and psychological heuristics that are clearly visible in Trial by Fire, Twelve Angry Men, and The Thin Blue Line show us how false descriptions can lead to people voting not guilty, or guilty. People who use fallacies, and heuristics tend to lie to themselves, and others. Both fallacies and heuristics are false descriptions in which people who are involved throughout all three cases use. In these three murder cases, lies are told, false conclusions are heard and people who are included in each case have the tendency to somehow become threatened. Throughout all three murder cases, fallacies and heuristics play a major role which lead people to vote guilty, or not guilty. The fallacies and heuristics might either lead to a well thought through conclusion or a very hasty general conclusion which might be incomplete. In Trial by Fire, Willingham was accused of killing his own three children in a fire that he might not have even started. Sadly in the end he was executed due to the evidence that was found and examined, although he might have not been guilty. Similar to Trial by Fire, The Thin Blue Line is also another murder case, in which one of the two men, were accused of murdering a police officer. Randall Adam and David Harris were two strangers to each other, and on Thanksgiving holiday David helps Randall out, as Randall had run out of gas earlier. Then later on while they were both supposedly together in David's car, one of them shot a police officer, when they are pulled over. David was accused of being the murderer because of his criminal file, and the actions he took during and after the case; but as the story reaches its climax, evidence provided, and comments made by both David and Randall clearly show that Randall was the

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murderer. In yet another case, *Twelve Angry Men*, a boy was accused of murdering his father. Witnesses that were called in for questioning provide enough detail on what they think they saw, yet might not be certain about. Only twelve Jurors were placed in a small hot room to discuss the case. In the beginning most men voted guilty except one, but as the movie reached its end all the Jurors voted not guilty, due to the new evidence that they concluded by using the evidence that they were provided. In the three murderer cases *Trial by Fire*, *The Thin Blue Line*, and *Twelve Angry Men*, no one is certain who is guilty, and who is not guilty, but yet a vote is taken that either ends a life, or give a life freedom. The heuristics and fallacies that were unintentionally used give the reader/viewer a polished view on what might have really happened, and thus leading to the person who actually committed the crime. In the three murder cases there are similarities and differences between both psychological heuristics, and logical fallacies.

People have the tendency to judge others depending on where they come from, what they did in their lives, and the level of their society. The severity effect is a heuristic that is dragged throughout all three cases, and it is sometimes the first fact that people tend to start with. In all three cases people immediately tend to judge every person that was accused of committing the crime. In *Twelve Angry Men*, and *The Thin Blue Line*, the boys David Harris, and the boy who was accused of killing his father were judged by where they came from, and decisions they made. The boy grew up in the slums, and we all know that slums are the breathing ground for criminals as juror 4 puts it (*TAM*, 22: 18). Juror 4 is using the genetic fallacy as the boy came from slums, and thus making an assumption that since

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slums are the breathing grounds for criminals, that the boy must be guilty because of his geographic origin. Juror number 11 questions that if the boy had really murdered his father why would he come back to the scene of the crime (TAM, 34). Juror 11's description can be used to exonerate the boy, as he does point out one very good fact. David on the other hand is judged by the viewer when he says that he took a gun that was his fathers, and took a neighbors car (TBL, 2: 15). The viewer will immediately convict David of committing the crime using the false description known as the severity effect. In the short story Trial by Fire, Willingham was judged due to the fact that he had beaten his wife up sometimes, and neighbors who were questioned said that they would hear him hitting and cursing at her (TBF, 3). Yet Willingham is judged again when his childhood history is brought up. When he was a teenager he used to sniff paint, he also liked girls, and fast cars. When Willingham was young he lived in a cramped house in a poor area, was arrested for shoplifting, driving while intoxicated, and stealing a bicycle (TBL, 3). This piece of evidence although is relevant but should not be held against Willingham because this piece of information is too old to be included in a murderer trial. It's as if no clear evidence can be found so the detectives grab any information they can get their hands on, which is unfair to the person being convicted of something that he might not have done. It is clearly stated that all three men that were accused were first judged by decisions they made during the time of the crime or in their past. This false description will cause an unbalance between fair and unfair because judging a person should not be based on past information. The statements stated above can either be taken into consideration when a final decision is made

on whether to exonerate or convict the person on death row. Appeal to force is also used in two cases and it is reflected due to the final vote some people took.

The appeal to force fallacy is used in both *Twelve Angry Men*, and *The Thin Blue Line*. When Juror 3 starts scolding at another Juror when he changes his vote to not guilty, clearly shows that he wants the Juror to vote guilty because the kid is a murderer he says (TAM, 33: 39). This shows that Juror 3 was using the fallacies of appeal to force, and personal attack. He uses personal attack when he starts telling the story about his son, how he got into a fight with him and hasn't seen him in two years (TAM, 21: 30). Similar to *Twelve Angry Men*, in *The Thin Blue Line* Randall Adams was being bullied into signing a confession by a detective, and the detective also threatened him by pulling a gun towards him, and threatening to shot him (TBL, 6: 19). Since threatening is involved then that might lead to the reader/viewer to the point that the detectives/police officers who are involved are uncertain who truly committed the crime, which leads them to use false descriptions to try and get closer to the truth. Other than appeal to force, the straw man argument is recognized in some cases, and it is either used in a strong or weak way depending on the false description at hand.

The Straw Man Argument is weakly used in *Trial by Fire* when Vasquez assumes that because there is a wall with skulls, and the grim reaper, then Willingham must have been drawn close to killing and murder (TBF, 2). This fallacy might also revolve around the severity effect, and genetic fallacy. The picture of the grim reaper is not supposed to be used to judge a person and

it should not be used to judge an action that a person has took whatsoever. This fallacy is also used in Twelve Angry Men when the jurors reassure that the knife the boy had used is one of its kind, but then Juror 8 grabs one exactly like it from his pocket, this shows that they are uncertain about the evidence provided yet they try to hide that fact (TAM, 28: 52). It is pathetic as they use the lamest of excuses to try and get jury duty over with rather than discussing the pieces of evidence that were present. It is clearly seen that people tend to care less about something that does not involve them losing their lives. The Jurors did not want to waste time since they claimed they were certain that the boy was the murderer (TAM, 13: 51). Emotional appeal is also a fallacy that is seen in all three cases.

Emotional Appeal is a false description made by both the viewer in The Thin Blue Line, and also in Trial by Fire. In Trial by Fire Willingham's stepmother wanted him to take the deal in which was if he pleaded guilty then he would have a life sentence, " I just wanted to keep my boy alive," she said (TBF, 5). Similar to Trial by Fire in The Thin Blue Line the viewer himself from what was discussed during jury deliberation, most of the jurors thought that David Harris couldn't have shot the officer; he is too young to do so. He was only bragging that he killed the cop but it was discussed how teenagers tend to show off (TBL, during jury deliberation). In a wide perspective in Twelve Angry Men Juror 3 is sort of leaning towards emotional appeal as he wants all the Jurors to vote guilty as he had problems with his own son, and it seems as if he's taking it out on a boy he doesn't even know. What strongly proves that he used emotional appeal was that at the end he tore up the picture he had, of himself with his son (TAM, 1: 32). Emotional appeal tends to affect

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people strongly as feelings overrule thought out thinking and ideas. When anyone sticks to a one sided case it might be due to something emotional or in other words it might be monocasuality.

Monocasuality was used by juror 2 in a straight foreword manner; he bluntly says I voted guilty since nobody proved otherwise (TAM, 15: 57). In a way all cases are guilty until proven innocent, but to achieve innocence is difficult, as people tend to make rash decisions as soon as the first piece of evidence is provided. In *The Thin Blue Line*, David Harris was directly accused of killing the cop just because he was the one that stole the car, and the gun. It's not necessary that he was the one that murdered the officer just because he did all those other crimes. Since it was known that he had stole the car, and the gun then people directly think that he was the one that shot the police officer. That's not always the case if the viewer would have focused enough it was clear that Randall Adams was the murderer with all the details he says throughout the movie. Everything didn't add up, Randall was going back and forth trying to change the story. Eye witnesses throughout all three cases also tend to change their story back and forth with no actual reason as to why.

Eye Witnesses that were there in all three cases had the tendency to go back and forth changing their stories; it's as if they just wanted to become a part of the murder case. In *Trial by Fire*, *Twelve Angry Men*, and *The Thin Blue Line* the people that were witnesses tell about what they saw happen when in fact they might have been either lying or not being clear enough. The woman that claim's to have seen the boy in *Twelve Angry Men* kill his father

says that she saw him murderer his father as the train was passing by, while she was lying in bed. This woman was known to have been wearing glasses, and if she was in bed then how would she have seen him do it if she was not wearing her glasses (TAM, 1: 23)? The old man said that he saw the boy running down the stairs, after he heard a body hit the floor above him. He could not have possibly made it to the door on time due to the leg that he drags because of a stroke that he had had the year before (TAM, 55: 00). Diane Barbee in Trial by Fire reported that “ I never saw Willingham try to get back into the house,” when at the time she was asked by Willingham to call the Fire Department. These false descriptions tend to help people make irrational decisions that lead the people to vote as guilty. On the other hand Diane’s daughter Buffie claims to have seen Willingham breaking a window trying to get back into the house, and the police officers on the scene had to restrain Willingham from going back into the house (TBF, 7). The woman in The Thin Blue Line claims that she saw Randall in the car while they were passing by, even though she says it was too dark and cold. She also asked her husband to slow down so she can see, but her husband refused, and said were getting out of here. “ But the driver’s window was down, and that’s how I got a good look,” she said. Her husband says that at first he couldn’t see anything, and it was too dark, you can only see shadows. Other than the fact that she claims to have saw Randall, she says that on that day she was going back home from work, when in reality she was fired about a week earlier (TBL, 52: 47). The other eye witness in Trial by Fire was the salesman he also claims to have seen Randall driving the car, but did not hear any gun shots because he drove on (TBL, 59: 17). The eye witnesses might be reliable in all



three cases but might not be trustworthy. The eye witnesses might have used hasty generalization fallacy, or non sequitur. In a wide point of view the three cases tend to revolve around these two fallacies, whether being right or wrong isn't the case, but they did use descriptions that they themselves weren't sure of. The fallacies tend to change to heuristics, which makes the description being used as a false irrational description. Throughout all three cases lies are told, fallacies and heuristics are used, and unthought-of conclusion are summed up, but in the end no one is certain of who was the true murderer, and who was innocent.

Throughout all three cases psychological heuristics, and logical fallacies tend to play a major role in who to exonerate, and who to convict. Although people tend to judge, not think it through, feel emotional, think that something might have happened, and basically lie to themselves, they still use the description they want to use. In Twelve Angry Men the boy who was at first convicted, gets exonerated at the end. This exoneration happened because of Juror 8's detailed conversations. At first eleven Jurors voted guilty while only one voted not guilty. It was that one Juror that bullied his way into other people's votes, and ended up somehow making them change their vote because of the satisfying evidence he pointed out. The same situation occurs in The Thin Blue Line as David Harris was accused of killing the officer, but when the information builds up, it is realized that Randall was the true murderer. This movie baffles the viewer as the director played with events that happened, comments that were said by people, and changed original plot into a more twisted and blurry plot. In Trial by Fire the case differs from the other two murderer cases, as Willingham ends up being

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executed. Although many pieces of evidence prove that he is not guilty, the evidence that prove he is guilty is somehow stronger. Willingham's was executed due to the fact that people thought that the evidence proved him guilty, when in fact no one is ever certain who is truly guilty. False Descriptions which are either fallacies or heuristics helped in the killing of people who were not guilty, or in the exoneration of other people. The world is unfair, and fallacies and heuristics are one main cause in the unbalance between justice and injustice.